



DEBATE



FORREST McDONALD

The leading public entertainment in America is politics, but it is a form of entertainment that we tend to confuse with reality. Accordingly, we are often inclined to regard past political events as the measure of what was then happening. Seen in that light, the 1820s were a rather humdrum time: a noisy to-do over slavery, a couple of fairly interesting presidential elections, a few Supreme Court decisions of note, a great deal of talk about tariffs, and otherwise ho-hum. But in actuality profound and decisive changes were taking place outside the political arena that would promote increasing sectional conflicts.

The most obvious of the changes were technological and economic. The proliferation of steamboats on inland waterways, in conjunction with the construction of many miles of canals and turnpike roads, set off a transportation revolution that would be an endlessly repeated feature of American life. The transportation revolution, in turn, drastically reduced shipping costs for farmers in the interior and redirected the attention of merchants and producers on the northeastern seaboard away from Europe and toward the hinterland. The South alone would continue to be dependent upon European markets.

The polarization of interests was intensified by the emergence, in the late twenties, of capitalistic manufacturing in New England, namely the production of textiles in mechanized, steam-powered factories. Earlier, textiles had been produced by hand in the home and in small shops. On that basis, slave labor was far cheaper than free labor; under the factory system it was the other way around. This was particularly ominous to slaveholders in the upper South, for there were more slaves there than could be profitably employed in raising tobacco, and none of the other great staple crops could be grown in the region. When manufacturing as an alternative outlet for slave labor ceased to be viable, the economic decay of the area became inevitable.

Less visible and less tangible but not less important political changes were taking place as well. There was a changing of the guard, dramatically symbolized by the death on July 4, 1826—the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence—of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. The Revolutionary generation and its successor had been a race of giants, men who were intensely practical but also immensely learned. Steeped in the Greek and Roman classics, versed in Renaissance humanism, learned in English legal and constitutional history, enriched by the Scottish Enlightenment, they represented a continuum and in some ways the climax of the best in a tradition that had extended over the course of two thousand years. They were the products of a unique set of circumstances, and American society had now become so vulgarized that it would never be able to produce their likes again. The ablest of the public men in the era after the 1820s—John Marshall, Henry Clay, John C. Calhoun, John Quincy Adams, Daniel Webster, Joseph Story, Nicholas Biddle—were towering figures compared to their contemporaries, but apart from Adams and Marshall, who were long-lived holdovers from the earlier era, not even these rare men were on a par with the Founders; and the public arena was soon to be overrun by pygmies. Indeed, the very unattractiveness of political life after the 1820s provided powerful stimulus to economic development, for it diverted the ablest Americans away from government and into private economic activity. Contrary to Professor Genovese's praise of the political system, this decline in the quality of leadership was as important in shaping the American destiny as any of the great technological and economic changes.

Nationalism or Sectionalism?

EUGENE D. GENOVESE

From the first days of the Republic, if not well before, American society encompassed an assortment of geographically grounded differences that nonetheless pointed toward national unity: settled, older regions against newer ones; cities against the countryside; capital-lending areas against debtor regions; manufacturing districts against agricultural. These divisions gave rise to conflicts of interest, to local, state, or regional pride and prejudices, to suspicions and hostilities. But in the North, these conflicts rested upon the solid foundations of a property system and constitutional polity that well represented the common interests of a coalescing nation. And they took place within a developing economy that steadily integrated the parts into the whole by the extension of markets and a superb system of transportation.

The South was another matter. It too had its sections and its sectionalisms: upper South and lower; black belt and upcountry; pro-tariff hemp and sugar areas and anti-tariff cotton areas; genteel tidewater communities and rough-and-tumble frontier communities; economically dynamic regions and economically stagnant or declining regions; and more. But slave property distinguished the entire South. The nonslaveholding majority of whites were caught in the web of the larger social system of slavery. Hence, while the South fought out internal sectional battles within each state and between states and regions, it increasingly closed ranks against the threat to its social system that was being mounted from without and, in muted ways, even from within.

The sectionalism that divided free from slave society had a much different character from the sectionalism that existed within the North. Differences among Northerners were never likely to provoke war. The division between the Northern and the Southern property systems, to the contrary, was likely to provoke war no matter how sensible and restrained the men on either side tried to be.

The republic, then, was from its earliest days dividing itself into distinct sections, but Professor McDonald speaks as though the sections, their economies, their mutual antagonism just happened, each section developing out of its own pre-established nature. He does not recognize how intensely political and ideological the whole process was. Hamiltonianism was possibly an inevitable expression of nascent capitalism and industrialism, but it was also certainly a conscious stimulant to those components of the American economy and for a time Hamiltonianism had to argue against its politically powerful Jeffersonian opponent. Southern slaveholding culture was intensely aware of itself, intensely determined to give itself a satisfying ideology and character—it even tried to import medieval tournaments—and its defensive political assault against Northern politicians was not merely a spasm reflex but a very deliberate attempt to define itself further. And politics, which had so much to do with shaping each of the sections and putting them at verbal war with each other, did a remarkable job of staving off actual war. From the Constitutional compact to the Missouri Compromise, then to the nullification crisis and beyond, Congress, the executive, and the courts, as well as the political parties and their leaders, prevented the issue from being joined. But each compromise proved more fragile than the one before, as two societies, one slave and one free, expanded at a quickening rate within a single nation-state that could not reconcile them.

Professor McDonald's denigration of politics and exultation of economics is an instance of that peculiar contradictory "conservatism" that he presents with considerable eloquence throughout these debates. Like others in his political camp, he perceives of the industrious, hardworking entrepreneur as a being full of will and freedom capable of remaking the world. But then Professor McDonald and his fellow conservatives will not grant to this American society, so plenteous in imagination and will, the ability to impose any measure of social and economic justice though the instrumentality of government.